

Through the President's Office

The Business of Being a Father



An address by
JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, JR.



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

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Delivered on behalf
of Fathers of Princeton Undergraduates
at the General Meeting on Alumni Day,
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*Three Reflections of a Father
Made in the Hope That They
May Be Suggestive to Other
Fathers*

*"The business of being a parent
cannot safely be transferred."*

*"If we want our boys to take a
worthy part in the world's work,
we must be their example."*

*"In business we do not want men
who just barely hold down the job.
We want men who not only do the
day's work, but who are constantly
looking for opportunities to make
themselves more helpful. Shall we
be satisfied with less and with
lower standards for our sons?
How can we expect that their ideals
will be high if our ideals for them
are low?"*

Dec. 19, 19

*The Business of Being
a Father*

MR. CHAIRMAN, Mr. President, members of the Princeton family: It is difficult to follow as a speaker the President of the Senior Class and Senior Council (Joseph Prendergast), especially when he has made so creditable a name for himself not only on the campus but in the outside world as well.

As I look over this large audience I am reminded of a story told about the Governor of a western state who had just been installed in his new office. It happened that he was invited to make his first speech as Governor, in a state penitentiary. He began in true campaign style by addressing his hearers as "Fellow citizens." But immediately realiz-

ing that they had all forfeited their citizenship, for the time at least, he became embarrassed, undertook to correct himself, and finally blurted out, "Well, fellows, anyhow I am glad to see so many of you here tonight." I, too, am glad to see so many fathers and sons of Princeton, and mothers as well, here today. I had not realized that the family was so large.

The Chairman has asked me to say "a few words"—"on behalf of the fathers." I shall punctiliously follow the first part of his request, and with equal punctiliousness decline to follow the second; for what father would presume to speak for any other father, especially with so many mothers present? However, I am glad to give you two or three reflections of one father in the hope that they may be suggestive to other fathers.

THE first is that the business of being a parent cannot safely be transferred. Dr. Fosdick preached a sermon recently on "This Machine Age." He took his text from that chapter in Exodus which describes how Moses on the journey through the wilderness assigned to one family so many wagons, to another so many, but to a certain family he assigned no wagons, for they were charged with the responsibility of the worship of the tabernacle. Their duties required their personal attention, the implements of their office were too precious to be entrusted to wagons, but had to be borne on their shoulders. "There are," said Dr. Fosdick, "certain things even in this machine age, when mass production and standardization are the watchwords, so important that they demand personal attention and must be carried upon the shoulders of those to

whom they are entrusted." The business of being a father is surely one of these things. Many try to transfer it to men like those on my right (pointing to President Hibben and Major Landon), but even they cannot relieve us of this responsibility and privilege. Just as the child instinctively looks to his father for food, clothing and shelter, so he turns first to him for companionship. If we fathers respond to this natural yearning and become the pals of our boys, we may have their confidence and friendship from the outset. If, on the other hand, they find us so much occupied with our business or our pleasure that we have no time for them and their interests, their youthful longing for the companionship of their fathers is quickly chilled and their affection and confidence promptly transferred to less worthy companions.

It is a wonderful thing, this business of being a father. As we get on in life I imagine many of us feel that to have given the world one clean, honest, God-fearing son, with an active sense of his responsibilities and obligations, is about as large a contribution to our day and generation as any father can hope to make.

MAY I introduce my second point by referring to my own father, who was just such a friend to me as I have been speaking of. In all the years of my close association with him, from earliest childhood, I cannot recall his ever having told me what to do and what not to do. But no influence in my life has been as powerful as the silent influence of his example. Boys and girls of the present day are pretty shrewd and penetrating. We cannot live one thing and

advocate another to them. We may think they are brutally frank, but we must do them the justice of admitting that they abhor hypocrisy. If we want our boys to take a worthy part in the world's work we must be their example. To do so may be at times irksome and trying, it may cramp our style, but there is no alternative.

MY last thought is recalled by a talk which I had several years ago with the principal of the school which some of my boys attend. I asked him why the school did not demand higher standards of work of the boys. His reply was, "Because the parents do not back us up in it." "Just the other day," he said, "I had to drop one of the boys from an athletic team, because his standing was not satisfactory. The next day his father appeared and demanded why his son had

been put off the team." "Has he failed in anything, has he flunked any examinations?" "No," said the principal, "but he has not maintained a satisfactory standing; he has just barely stayed in school." Whereupon the father replied that that was all he wanted in the way of work from his son. He wanted him to be on the athletic team, he wanted him to participate in the social affairs of the school, and so long as he held his grade that was satisfactory.

If this is the attitude of parents generally, educators may well throw up their hands in despair. Our boys will do no better than we hope and expect they will do. If we are satisfied with mediocrity for them, it is in mediocre places that we shall find them.

In business we do not want men who just barely hold down the job. We want men who not only do the day's work,

but who are constantly looking for opportunities to make themselves more helpful. Shall we be satisfied with less and with lower standards for our sons? How can we expect that their ideals will be high if our ideals for them are low?

DURING the war there was a sector on the French front that was being held at terrific sacrifice. Already preparations had been made for the removal to the rear of the wounded and supplies. Then down the road came a troop of soldiers, clear of eye, of swarthy countenance and dauntless mien, marching under the American flag. To the right and left, men with blanched faces put to their leader as he passed, the question, "Can you hold them? Can you hold them?" . . . "Can we hold them?" replied he, "We are going on through!" Shall we fathers be satisfied to have our

sons just hold a passing mark in college, or do we want them to go on through, getting the best they can from earnest effort put forth, and entering the world with well trained minds and bodies, to perform the full duty of a man, so succinctly described by the first speaker (Earnest Cosma Bartell, winner of the Pyne Honor Prize) as being "To worship God and serve man."